

AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE ACTION*

By nature, the conservative is not made for action. Burke compared the great conservative interests of England to cattle browsing under the oaks, quiet when compared with the noisy insects of the hour, the radical grasshoppers, but possessed of strength and endurance far exceeding the powers of the restless innovators. Randolph of Roanoke cried out once to Congress, "I have found the philosopher's stone! It is this: never, without the greatest provocation, to disturb a thing that is at rest." At his dullest, the conservative mutters, with Fafnir, "Let me rest: I lie in possession." At his noblest, with Newman, the conservative looks upon this world as a place of trial, never to be much improved by political action, human nature being irremediably flawed; thus the real function of the statesman and the philosopher is to keep human existence tolerable rather than to risk the legacy of civilization through lusting after Utopia.

To speak of American conservative action, then, may seem a contradiction in terms. The instinct of the conservative, as Lord

Mr. Kirk is one of the foremost proponents of the new Conservatism. His most recent book is *Academic Freedom*.

* Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

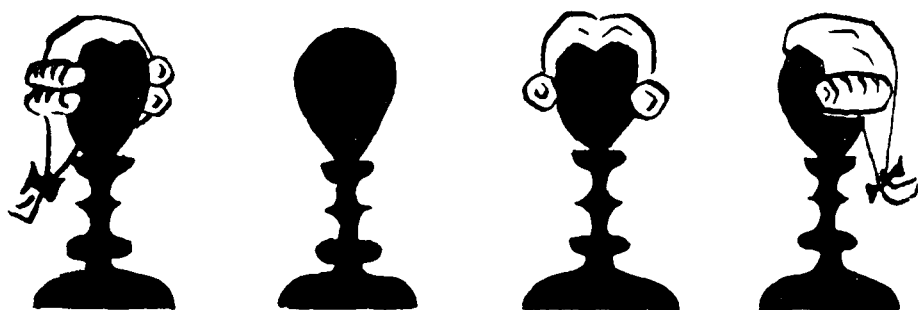
Hailsham observes, is to enjoy life as he finds it, not to mold society nearer to his heart's desire; nor does he think of practical politics as the end and aim of being. Family life, church, literature, good talk, good dinners, sometimes good hunting—these things please him far more than parliamentary intrigue or journalistic controversy. It is this mood of enjoyment, in part, which until recently put conservatives at a disadvantage in the United States. For this has been a land of great expectations, rather than of realized satisfactions. The conservative has no enthusiasm for circulating petitions or addressing mass meetings. When he acts, he acts only from compulsion. In this sense conservatism always has been reactionary: that is, the conservative reacts against some revolutionary excess, and is forced out of his normal complacency into the world of action. Yet when the conservative does act, often he exhibits the strength and hardihood of the cattle under the oaks, roused to the consciousness of peril. From time to time in the history of the modern era the fountains of the great deep have been broken up, and the conservative has been compelled to look into his own heart and to improvise some reform of society, that the great chain of continuity—linking us with the dead and those not yet born—may not be severed fatally. Such an hour envelops America now. Ros-siter's principal concern is to invest American conservatives with a sense of their great responsibility.

Generally we think of the great conservative as prophet and critic rather than as reformer and improviser. Henry A. Kissinger of Harvard, in a penetrating essay on the thought of Metternich, recently described "the conservative dilemma" in all times—that is, the ability of the thinking conservative to analyze and predict the course and consequence of revolution, but his impotence to arrest consuming innovation, once the process of radical change has commenced. "It is the task of the conservative," Kissinger concludes, "not to defeat but to forestall revolutions . . . a society which cannot *prevent* a revolution, the disintegration of whose values has been demonstrated by the *fact* of revolution, will not be able to defeat it by conservative

means . . . order once shattered can be restored only by the experience of chaos.”

America now has the immense and intricate task of endeavoring to forestall chaos. I do not mean that the United States are in any danger of violent revolution: such a hypothesis would be absurd. Not the crushing of armed enemies of internal order, but instead the prevention of the rise of a moral and social collectivism—whether that state is given the name of “communism” or “capitalism” or “social democracy”—is the American conservative task. But America, not having experienced violent revolution, remains only dimly aware of the necessity for re-examining first principles and taking prudent action to shore up order and justice and freedom. The recent revival of serious discussion on conservative lines in this country, however, is a heartening indication that the American nation is beginning to awake to the lateness of the hour and the importance of conservative reform.

A historian of politics like Rossiter is just the man to write a book of this sort. The task is far more than sociological: it requires the historical imagination, and the realization that nations, like persons, cannot shut themselves off from their past. Somewhat less than half of *Conservatism in America* is concerned with tracing the history of conservative ideas and prejudices in this country—a work which Rossiter commenced in his earlier work *Seedtime of the Republic*. Quite rightly, I think, Rossiter chooses Burke, John Adams, and John C. Calhoun as the great molders of our conservative mind. These are integral conservatives, not merely men with a streak of conservative instinct woven into their characters: and though Neal Riemer, in a recent number of the *Antioch Review*, makes out a strong case for James Madison as a central figure in American conservative politics, still the complex and scarcely consistent thought and action of Madison seem to me to be at the fringe of conservative polity rather than at the heart. With such integral conservatism Rossiter contrasts the pseudoconservatism of the latter half of the nineteenth century, which he generally calls “laissez-faire conservatism.” It is,



in fact, simply Manchesterian liberalism, and no one thought of calling the thought of people like John W. Burgess “conservative” until Parrington and other twentieth-century liberals of the new school began giving some very curious twists to the old word “conservative.” The whole view of the meaning of life and human satisfaction which the apologists of nineteenth-century industrial energy expounded was profoundly different from that of Burke, Adams, and Calhoun. It would be an error, however, to suppose that the true conservatives, then or now, stand for the paternalistic state as against a free economy. Such paternalism as conservatives advocate is local, and the product of private duties rather than centralized and governmental.

Rossiter brings us down to our present time of troubles, in which American conservatism—though once more conscious of natural rights and corresponding natural duties and aware of its legacy of tradition—nevertheless exerts little direct influence upon practical politics and even has difficulty in expressing itself coherently in print. He is more confident than I am that there exists a really strong conservative revival among us. Sometimes I fear that the present comparative popularity of the term “conservative” is only a passing fancy, to be swept aside in the next rush of material aggrandizement or “liberal” emotionalism. What looks for a time like success often turns out to be no more than an ephemeral popularity, to be destroyed by the next fad. Rossiter’s book should itself do something, however, to give permanence to the present conservative mood of the nation.

For the conservatives have a great potential advantage at

present—the disillusion and bafflement of the leaders of radical and new-style “liberal” opinion. The intellectual appeal of Marxism, or of any abstract system of social alteration, is at a low ebb just now. On the surface it may seem otherwise: China has fallen to the Marxists, and varieties of Marxist ideology are at work in much of the rest of Asia. Yet what we see bubbling and boiling there is simply yesterday’s European ferment, the belated Asiatic imitation of a system of ideas already gone out of fashion in the West. If the West restores some tolerable conservative order, in time this, too, will be imitated by the rest of the world. When the influence of communism declines in the Italian industrial towns and seeks refuge in the Two Sicilies, among the poorest and most ignorant of the population, the process of degeneration of this ideology is far advanced. For just such always has been the history of lost causes. Scarcely anyone is left in North America or western Europe who really believes in pure Marxism: the revolutionary intellectuals portrayed in Wyndham Lewis’ *Revenge for Love* or Koestler’s *Age of Longing* are forlorn and embittered wretches unable to believe their own words. They are not the stuff that New Jerusalems are made of. All of us—including the editors of the *Partisan Review*—are reactionaries today. We have reacted against the great social catastrophe of our time, the Russian Revolution.

The end of man is an action, Aristotle tells us; and the highest form of action is intellectual action. It is in the realm of the mind, as Rossiter sees, that conservatives need to act first; there is little point in rushing into programs of reform without reference to first principles. Reforming conservatives, indeed, long have suffered from a dangerous tendency to think that improvement must be simply a milder and slower version of the measures advocated by their adversaries—“stealing the clothes of the Whigs,” or “splitting the difference,” or yielding to “the inevitability of gradualism.” This may postpone or even prevent a violent revolution, but it does not forestall for any great while the ultimate triumph of the radicals. Conservatives in this hour of opportunity

need to remind themselves that they believe in a moral and temporal order different not merely in degree from a collectivist's Utopia, but different in kind.

Rossiter is truly a conservative—though showing traces, now and then, of a lingering liberalism; and the conservative society he wants to preserve and improve is not merely a compromise with collectivism—the “mixed economy” popular with a good many reformed liberals nowadays. And he has some definite ideas as to how we are to nurture a conservative society. I do not mean that he gives us a neat plan of action. A conservative cannot draw up a Conservative Manifesto to match the Communist Manifesto; for the true conservative does not believe that society can be properly governed by any inflexible creed of abstract doctrine. The conservative is not a fanatic. He knows that the problems of humanity are tortuously intricate and that some of these problems never will be solved at all. If he is honest, he cannot preach to the multitude that they have only to shout for his Manifesto and the terrestrial paradise is theirs. He knows that we are not made for Utopia. He abjures ideology, though he is firmly attached to principle—a distinction made by Burke in 1787. He knows that every nation and every community must apply general conservative principles in varied ways, tempered by prudence. The conservative has no blueprint which will enable the social engineer to govern all men uniformly at all times.

It would be silly, then, to expect of Rossiter a list of specific cures for all the ills which flesh is heir to. Radicals and liberals are in the habit of thinking that man is perfectible and that we need only a well-devised program of legislation to satisfy all human wants. When, then, a conservative like Rossiter dissents from their specific, they demand that he produce *his* nostrum for attaining human perfection. But (as William Schlampp recently remarked of a book by this writer) this is like a tribe of Africans reproaching a Christian missionary because he carries no voodoo charms. The conservative simply does not possess an ideology in the strict sense of that word; and he does not desire one. He

believes that the only sure reform which a man can effect is the improvement of one human unit, himself; and he thinks that the really important change required for the betterment of society is a change in heart. He makes no claim that the triumph of conservative principles would establish perfect happiness or perfect justice. As Rossiter writes, the conservative believes that men are not likely ever to enjoy much more liberty or security than they enjoy at present in this country. Therefore the conservative's chief concern is to preserve the best things we already have rather than to lay out some Grand Design to be executed by positive legislation.

But this is not to say that Rossiter is lacking in recommendations. He thinks that conservatives in the American tradition have three principal fields for action: public service and politics, the defense of liberty, and "the unfinished business of American democracy." In this last section he is concerned with our duty to maintain a republic in which natural leadership and just distinctions among men are recognized, a democracy of elevation, not the degradation of the democratic dogma into a sterile equalitarian boredom. Though he writes in very general terms, his words ought to do good. Sometimes, however, Rossiter is rather too anxious to please and to attract recruits to the conservative movement by being all things to all men. His paragraph on the future role of the conservative in education is a sample of this and is probably the least sound in his whole book:

Here in particular, in the field of education, the new conservatism can steer a steady course down the middle—between Deweyites and anti-Deweyites, vocationalists and generalists, all-out democrats and unrealistic elitists, traditionalists and progressives, sectarians and secularists, advocates of "moral education" and advocates of studied indifference, absolutists of the Right and absolutists of the Left. It must not let the community forget the conservative mission of education; it must not let itself forget the difference between conservatism in the interest of all and reaction in the interest of a few.

Surely this is to mistake the disputed middle for the golden mean. I should like to see anyone actually try this prescription of steering casually between all persons who hold any pro-

nounced views on education. Rossiter might have been wise to have recalled Lincoln's words upon a nation's remaining half free and half slave. Lincoln was not preaching a crusade when he said this: he was simply stating a fact. To be halfway between Dewey's system of education and the traditional disciplines of learning is to hang like Mahomet's coffin; everyone would be dissatisfied; such an attempt at compromise without principle never endures. All in all, Rossiter simply does not seem to have thought through the implications of the paragraph I have quoted; it is quite inconsistent with his general view of the necessity for reasonably defined principles among conservatives.

It must also be said that Rossiter's recommendations, while sound, do not often touch upon the more profound questions of the future of American civilization. Next to nothing is said of the ominous standardization, boredom, and decay of taste reflected in *The Lonely Crowd*; there is no examination of the problem of checking Leviathan in business and in government, although Rossiter does remark the conservative's attachment to the "little platoon" in society; and although Rossiter does touch upon American conservatives' failure to say just how that necessary aristocracy may be maintained among us without which any society decays, he himself does not explore the problem.

What Rossiter is searching for is a truly practical conservatism in accord with the historical experience and the present necessities of the United States of America. He is trying to point the way to a conservatism of reflection (which he calls Conservatism, with a capital C), as against the conservatism of mere prejudice and self-interest, which he leaves in lower case. By implication he dissents from Daniel Boorstin's thesis, in *The Genius of American Politics*, that we will get along most happily in the political world if we refrain from adhering to any set of principles—a kind of muddling through on principle. Rossiter realizes that the natures and necessities of nations can alter, and that while a young, expanding, and comparatively isolated republic, under certain circumstances, can get along very well without serious political thought, a great national power, intrusted with

the leadership of half the world and menaced by an intolerant ideology and an armed doctrine, cannot afford to ignore the question of just what constitutes a good society. This point is not very clearly developed in *Conservatism in America*, but it underlies much of Rossiter's urgent argument.

It is rather surprising, then, to find him turning his back upon himself in some matters, toward the end of the book, and saying that in America we ought not to try to have Conservatism, but merely a new conservatism. Bearing in mind the uses of upper and lower case to which I have referred above, it seems that Rossiter has abandoned his own definitions and settled for a mood rather than for elevated principles. As if anxious to conciliate certain pragmatic thinkers, he partially retracts his earlier attachment to Burke and argues that John Adams is a better guide for Americans. This, I think, is to run the risk of falling into one hundred per cent Americanism, always a plague of the Right. One might as well argue that John Cotton is a better theologian for us than Richard Hooker because of the place of his nativity. There is not, in fact, any very substantial difference between the political principles of Burke and Adams; but in so far as a difference exists, the situation of England in 1787, say, is much closer to the present situation of the United States than were the circumstances of our republic at the time the Constitution was drawn up. National historical experience, though it matters a great deal, is not all.

And Rossiter slides toward a similar recantation when he says, "We are not ready in this country for what has been called 'country-house Conservatism.' If we are lucky, we may never be." I am afraid that he comes rather close to cant here. Does Rossiter really think that it did Jefferson harm to live at Monticello, or that Roosevelt sank into reaction through living at Hyde Park? There is country-house liberalism, as well as country-house conservatism; and it seems to me that both are valuable, so long as balanced by other elements in both factions. Does he think that Joseph Chamberlain's mind and character were superior to those of Lord Salisbury, or that Thaddeus Stevens

was a better American than Robert E. Lee? An attachment to landed property always has been a chief prop to an elevated and responsible conservatism; and the sense of heritage and duty which often accompanies such possession has had its place in American society as well as European. I cannot believe that Rossiter really entertains any serious dread that we are going to find ourselves ruled by country squires; the danger is, rather, that the permanence and leisure and sense of responsibility which country life and inherited property helped to sustain will be effaced altogether by modern urbanization and taxation. Real American conservatism could profit considerably from a more generous infusion of this. *Pace* John T. Flynn, I do not think we ought to be terrified at the prospect of a country squire in the White House; but we have reason to be disturbed at the prospect of a cabinet, some time in the future, composed entirely of automobile-dealers.

The preceding strictures, however, are only small exceptions to the sound and tolerant understanding of American conservative character and history which Rossiter possesses. His book is not intended as an *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism*; it is meant, rather, to stimulate discussions and raise the whole tone of conservative politics in this country. I believe it will do just that.

Rossiter has made only a beginning toward the study of the conservative nature of American institutions and the necessities of conservative action; but a good beginning it is. The conservative knows there never will be an end. The struggle between conservatism and radicalism will continue perpetually in America, as everywhere else. The American conservative does not complain of this. He knows that we are creatures of mingled good and evil, made for struggle and trial, according to the light that is given us; we should expire of boredom if ever struggle should cease. G. K. Chesterton, in *The Ballad of the White Horse*, tells of the vision of the Virgin which came unto King Alfred amidst his wars with the Danes; and Mary says to the king,

"I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.

"Night shall be thrice night over you,
And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope?"

Now these words heartened Alfred. For King Alfred, a redoubtable conservative some centuries before the word "conservative" was thought of, knew that we are put into this world to contend for the right like men. Without the peril of destruction of the best in civilization there would be no motive to conservative action and no honor in being a man. The poetic imagination—Rossiter's book would be even better with some touch of it—in some ages belongs principally to the radicals; but in our time it is in the keeping of the conservatives. There is something better than dynamic conservatism, and that is imaginative conservatism. For the better society is not simply an exercise in practical government. *Conservatism in America* makes it clear that party management is not everything. Rossiter is writing of a way of living and thinking, not simply of the hurly-burly of ephemeral debate. This is a good way above the general level of the present clash of "conservatism" and "liberalism." And if we Americans are to lead the nations, we shall have to think less and less about doubling or tripling the standard of living and more and more about what makes life worth living.

